

Study says railway plan lacks riders

A commuter line between Omaha and Lincoln would not carry enough people to qualify for federal funding.

BY ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS
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Building a commuter rail system to serve Lincoln and Omaha would cost about \$80 million, but finding the money won't be easy.

For starters, there wouldn't be enough riders to meet the threshold for federal funding. So most of the money for such a project would have to come from financially strapped state and local governments.

Those findings were in the Nebraska Transit Corridors Study sent to the Nebraska Legislature on Tuesday. The report examined the state's transportation corridors, especially those in larger cities. It focused on using trains and buses for commuters along those routes.

"There's no doubt that the timing is real bad with the budget problems we are having in the state," said Duane Eitel, chairman of the Nebraska Transit and Retail Advisory Council. "If this study would have been done a few years earlier, this would have been easier to look at."

The 11-member group conducted the study with two consulting firms.

Eitel said the study, begun in October 2002, doesn't make specific recommendations on which form of public transportation state and local governments should embrace. It notes more and more states are looking at intercity rail passenger services as a way to ease interstate traffic con-

Transit at a glance

■ A commuter rail system between Lincoln and Omaha could generate between 141,000 and 499,000 riders per day in 2010.

■ Daily express bus ridership between Fremont and Omaha would range from 24,000 to 29,000; daily ridership between Blair and Fremont would be about 28,000 to 32,000.

■ Commuter rail: Total capital costs for track and station improvements and rolling stock for a commuter rail system would be about \$79.3 million. Operating subsidies could range from \$3.9 million to \$4.2 million in 2010.

■ Express bus: Total capital costs for new park-and-ride facilities and rolling stock and other amenities total \$3 million for Lincoln-to-Omaha; \$2.1 million for Fremont-Omaha; and \$2.1 million for Blair-to-Omaha. Operating subsidies could range from \$198,000 to \$270,000 in 2010 for Lincoln-Omaha; from \$51,000 to \$64,000 for Fremont-Omaha; and \$18,000 to \$24,000 for Blair-to-Omaha in that year.

■ Existing trackage would be used but additional sidings and rail facilities would be built.

■ There would be no weekend service offered on rail or bus, but trains could serve special events.

gestion and provide more travel choices.

The study was funded with a \$200,000 federal grant and about \$6,000 in private donations. Lawmakers created NTRAC in 1999 but did not appropriate funds for the study. Members were appointed by Gov. Mike Johanns.

Railroad

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"Our role was to give the facts to the Legislature, and it will be up to them to decide where to go next," Eitel said.

A meeting will be scheduled with the Legislature's Transportation and Telecommunications Committee in January.

Dan Lutz, a board member of ProRail Nebraska, which supports rail transportation, said he was disappointed with the study but not surprised by some of its findings.

"The most crippling result of it was the finding that the projected or estimated number of riders would not meet the standard for receiving or applying for federal aid," Lutz said. "We know it would have a rough ride in Nebraska under the best of conditions."

The study said a rail system would cost about \$76 per new rider in 2010. To get federal funds, that figure would need to be \$50 or less. It also would need to be between \$12 and \$25 to seriously compete with other projects around the nation. However, express buses had per-rider costs that were considered good for federal funding.

Lutz said he was not completely discouraged by the study's findings.

"We're glad that the study got done and it will provide a benchmark," he said.

If a rail commuter system were built, Lincoln would have a station in northeast Lincoln, a depot and a maintenance facility that could be built for about \$14.3 million. The only stop between Lincoln and Omaha would be in Gretna.

Lutz said his group has pushed for a stop in Ashland, so riders could visit Mahoney State Park, the Strategic Air and Space Museum and other attractions.

"I don't think they looked closely at the possibility of added ridership, which might have helped tip the balance," Lutz said.

Eitel said consultants looked at building a station at Ashland, but not enough potential riders existed to justify the cost. That could change once the rail system was in operation.

Some viewed the study as a way to eliminate the need for more lanes on Interstate 80, but Eitel said that was not its purpose.

"There are not many choices in Nebraska on how to get from Point A to Point B," Eitel said. "If you want to get to Omaha your choices are limited, so this would give more choices for transportation."

"Whether it is worth \$80 million is a question for the Legislature to decide."

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